

*“Identification and protection of [scenic] assets is an important component of smart growth and scenic stewardship.” —National Scenic Byways Program*

The Commonwealth of Virginia has abundant and diverse visual and scenic resources that entice visitors and have a lasting appeal for residents. From the majestic mountains and tranquil valleys, to the foothills of the Shenandoah, to the Atlantic's coastal white beaches and sand dunes, Virginia is a cornucopia of varied landscapes. Many vistas lure people to explore and visit cultural and historic sites rich in architecture. Quaint towns and rolling landscapes reminiscent of days past add to the scenic value and experiences sought by Virginia's tourists. Virginia's scenic rivers program recognizes exemplary beauty of designated rivers that bisect mountain ranges, farms, woodlands and tidal marshes throughout the state. The world-renowned Chesapeake Bay offers views of working water vessels and watermen, small coastal communities and vast tidal marshes and lowland swamps. Virginia's natural resource richness certainly is reflected in scenic character where the built environment is designed in harmony with nature.

### Benefits of scenic quality

#### Recreation benefits

- Having attractive places to visit are critical in making leisure time decisions.
- Since people pay to experience scenic landscapes, scenic views and scenery are used to rate car, hiking and other tour routes by local, state and national entities to attract tourism to an area.

#### Economic benefits

- Virginia provides tax benefits to the private sector for preserving and managing lands with scenic and natural values through a law (*Code of Virginia* §§ 58.1-3229 through 58.1-3244), which permits localities to adopt a program of special assessments.
- Farmland is considered scenic and contributes positively to the state's economy.



*Eastern Shore in Accomack County. Photo by Nancy Sorrells.*

- Localities that protect scenic resources are sought after by residents and attract new residents (examples are in Albemarle, Loudoun, and Clarke counties).
- State park economic impact statements indicate that property values increase by 10 percent within a quarter of a mile of a major open space resource like a state park.
- There are economic values attached to trees and tree-covered areas. These are important and should be considered above the timber value when appraisals are done. The International Society of Arboriculture ([www.isa-arbor.com](http://www.isa-arbor.com)) has developed a process for calculating landscape values of trees.
- Redevelopment projects may incorporate restoration of open space and reclaim the visual integrity of previously disturbed sites.

### Psychological benefits

- Landscapes form a sense of place and provide a common point of reference over time for many generations.
- Visually attractive work and living environments have a positive effect on habits and attitude of workers contributing to the success of businesses and organizations.
- Scenic views have a beneficial impact on patients receiving treatment or recovering from medical procedures.

### Findings

- Three of the top ten reasons for visiting or touring Virginia relate to scenic resources: visiting historic places, driving for pleasure, and visiting natural areas, preserves and refuges.
- As the rate of development increases, visual resources diminish.
- Homebuyers seek protected scenic areas and are willing to pay more for properties adjacent to protected resources.
- The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) has changed its focus from the acquisition of trail corridor to viewshed protection.
- Repeated studies show no decreases, and often an increase, in property values along greenways, parks and natural areas because of scenic values associated with these properties.

- Air pollution is having a major impact on some natural areas, their resources, scenic views and park visitation numbers.
- Studies on highway hypnosis show that wildflower beds, or other large areas of color, break up the view allowing travelers to be more alert.
- Light pollution is dramatically increasing, taking away the natural treasure of the night skies. Over 30 percent of outdoor lights are directed skyward and none of the state has excellent dark-skies as defined by the John Bortle's Light Pollution Scale.

### Recommendations

- Each locality should conduct a visual resources assessment as part of their green infrastructure inventory and mapping process. Consider using universities and other institutions to help supplement and support this effort.
- Universities with landscape architecture and planning programs should incorporate visual assessment techniques in their curriculum requirements.
- Localities should ensure that a component of their comprehensive plan provides for the protection and enhancement of scenic resources, visual character and viewsheds.
- Localities should develop corridor management plans for scenic byways, blueways and greenways to assure preservation of the scenic quality of the corridor.
- DCR, along with other organizations, should prepare a brochure that enumerates the benefits of scenic environments and how stewardship of scenic resources is a basic tenant of smart growth.
- DCR should co-sponsor, along with other agencies, universities and organizations, a workshop on scenic and aesthetic resources and the tools and techniques available to evaluate, map, quantify and manage resources.
- Grant administrators should give extra consideration for funding of projects that protect or enhance scenic resources.
- DCR will continue to comment on highway projects, including all state and federally funded bridge projects. If DCR knows that a locality wants an alternative bridge design at a particular location, they will include that request in the comments that are provided to VDOT.
- Localities should develop light ordinances to limit light pollution.

## Scenic Resources

### Legislative references to scenic resources

It has been established through the court system that states and localities can protect scenic resources by upholding local landmark protection laws. In Virginia, scenic resources are recognized by the mention of the word 'scenic' in over 160 sections of the *Code of Virginia*. The *Code of Virginia* §10.1-108 defines environment as "the natural, scenic, scientific and historic attributes of the commonwealth." The effect of planning, transportation, mining, signage, advertising and management of the environment, including its scenic values are also referenced in the *Code of Virginia*. The establishment of boards and committees to protect scenic resources and the creation of a tax benefit for properties that protect scenic resources are outlined in legislation (see box on the Special Use Tax). Other statutes uphold local scenic protection laws and recognize the value of scenic resources through specially designed license plates.

#### A tool for the protection of scenic and open space resources:

The "Standards for Classification of Real Estate" regulation is under the Virginia Land Use Assessment Law, which requires consistency with the land use plan. The regulation identifies the following five major open space categories (Special Use Tax provisions of the *Code of Virginia*, Article 4 of Chapter 32, Title 58.1):

**Park and recreation use lands:** Public, semi-public or privately owned parks, playgrounds or similar recreational areas operated for public or community use.

**Conservation or other natural resource lands:** Lands protected for the preservation of forest and wildlife resources, watersheds, nature preserves, arboretums, marshes, wetlands and similar natural areas.

**Floodways:** Lands subject to periodic or occasional flooding that accommodate the passage or containment of floodwaters. These may include areas adjacent to floodplains reserved as additional channels for future floods.

**Historic or scenic areas:** Properties on the Virginia Landmarks Register or the National Register of Historic Places, as well as properties protected by scenic or open space easements and sites designated or recommended as scenic by the Departments of Conservation and Recreation, Historic Resources, Transportation, or other state or local agency.

**Character landscapes:** Lands determined to be of value in shaping the character of the region or the direction and timing of community development.



Lake Robertson in Rockbridge County. Photo by Nancy Sorrells.

### Importance of scenic resources

Scenic resources are important to both the quality of life and the economy. The 2000 President's Commission found that Americans primarily choose a place to visit based on "natural beauty." The most recent *Virginia Outdoors Survey* supports this by reporting that 56 percent of Virginians travel to historical areas, 44 percent visit natural areas and 22 percent visit gardens and arboretums. The challenge is to maintain scenic quality and preserve landscape vistas and viewsheds at historically and culturally significant sites and throughout Virginia's communities. This will strengthen visual identity and character, support economic viability and create a better quality of life.

Much of the scenery in Virginia is associated with landscapes of agrarian activities and forestry. Changing trends in rural areas have opened opportunities for improved economies through tourism, new businesses, industry and commercial development. Protection of scenic resources in rural and suburbanizing regions of the Commonwealth is particularly important to ensure the continued viability of tourism, recreation and eco-tourism industries.

Throughout rural, suburban and urban areas, protection of scenic resources is integral in maintaining and creating a sense of community. Visual resources become icons for communities creating a sense of place and identity. Aesthetically designed communities that integrate natural landscape features into recreation destinations and enhance scenic character improve real estate values, create destination recreation and tourism opportunities, and make communities more attractive for redevelopment and new development.

## Development and scenic resources

A visually pleasing community is critical to community development goals and is linked with environmentally sound economic viability and quality of life. Throughout the Commonwealth, scenic resources are at risk from sprawling development and related gray infrastructure expansion of roads, utilities, windmills, cell towers, billboards and light pollution. As urbanization migrates from the urban core, farmland and forests are converted to subdivisions, commercial areas and other developments. Conserving scenic character in the transition from urban to rural landscape scenery is important for visual integrity and a community's quality of life.

Development and redevelopment of communities provide an opportunity to conserve visually sensitive areas and create new developments in harmony with existing landscapes. Design of new development and redevelopment should be appropriately scaled to fit the surrounding landscape and allow for healthy lifestyles while enhancing streetscape aesthetics. Investments that improve the appearance of traditional commercial areas, especially landscaping, attract new businesses, stimulate economic development and increase property values.

## Local action needed for scenic resources

Localities need to positively influence scenic quality through local land use controls and by identifying and protecting scenic resources. Each locality has available a set of land use and conservation tools to improve and maintain scenic resources and open space. At the local level, it is important to identify visual character, viewsheds and scenic resources for protection. Comprehensive plans, technical resource studies and local ordinances are effective mechanisms for protecting and enhancing the visual environment. Often, conservation tools and strategies also may be implemented to maintain the scenic integrity of the landscape and community. These tools and resources can be applied to protect scenic assets

and prevent the cumulative impact of development on scenic resources, thereby preserving community economics and quality of life.

### Scenic resource planning tools

- Comprehensive plans
- Green infrastructure plans
- Open space plans
- Parks and recreation plans
- Visual and scenic resources inventories and assessments
- Natural and cultural resource inventories
- Environmental inventories
- Greenways plans and studies

Methods are available for conducting visual assessments of roadways, rivers, resorts, mining, forestry, historic areas and communities. These evaluation methods quantifiably determine the quality of scenic resources and how major public works and larger-scale developments and policies will affect the scenic, natural and cultural landscape. There are also various methods to systematically identify, inventory, evaluate and prioritize visual and scenic attributes. Landscape architects and design professionals can help formulate strategies to protect views to and from a resource and the overall appearance of scenic sites and corridors.

### Scenic resource management and conservation tools

Some of the tools available to local planners that help maintain or improve visual quality within communities include:

- Site planning.
- Requisite setbacks.
- Buffers for designated areas.
- Parking requirements.
- Screening requirements for designated areas.
- Landscaping requirements.
- Facade and architectural guidelines.
- Urban forestry or streetscape initiatives.
- Signage regulations.
- Transportation access control.

## Scenic Resources

- Stormwater runoff control guidelines.
- Erosion and sediment control regulations.
- Landscape maintenance requirements.
- Ridge-top preservation ordinances.
- Conservation easements.

Other initiatives that enhance community driven scenic protection include:

- Supporting an aggressive anti-litter campaign to eliminate trash and illegal signs.
- Proposing underground utilities to reduce the cost of sidewalk widening.
- Proposing tree plantings and tree maintenance.
- Encouraging placement of development away from visually sensitive sites.
- Redeveloping unattractive sites using standards to create visual appeal and scenic quality.

### Federal efforts supporting scenic resources in Virginia

Scenic views from and toward several federal parks and national forests within Virginia are being impacted by land use changes and air pollution in the viewshed. The National Park Service is monitoring and working with local governments to manage impacts that affect the views from the Skyline Drive, the Appalachian Trail and the Blue Ridge Parkway.

### Appalachian Trail and Skyline Drive

The National Park Service (NPS) reports that along Skyline Drive and the Appalachian Trail visibility has shrunk to as little as one mile on smoggy summer days. The natural range of visibility in Virginia's mountains used to be 115 miles, but now the average visibility is approximately 15 miles. Pollutants are carried by wind currents to the park from the locations inside and outside of the state. As reported by NPS, acid rain and ozone impacts, are also affecting vegetation and habitat health in the area. Some plants are showing effects that range from visible injury on leaves, premature leaf loss, and reduced growth. While these effects have occurred gradually over time, they indicate a threat to forest resources and may hamper enjoyment of these park resources for future generations.

### Information on the air quality in Shenandoah National Park.

[www.rappflow.org/press/press\\_air-water-snp.html](http://www.rappflow.org/press/press_air-water-snp.html)

### Blue Ridge Parkway

Intensive residential development along the Blue Ridge Parkway detracts from the scenic character of the parkway experience, especially in the Roanoke area. As more and more people move to scenic areas near the parkway, the challenge to protect those values and resources increases. Landscape architects have held a key role in integrating and managing scenic resources while protecting and providing recreational assets along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

### Protecting scenic resources throughout the Commonwealth

Scenic resource protection is recognized as an essential component in the conservation of natural resources. Conservation lands are sometimes established to maintain the visual integrity surrounding important habitats and special communities. In addition, green infrastructure planning methodology and greenway development may help to preserve scenic value within communities.

The Virginia Byways and Scenic Rivers programs systematically evaluate and recognize visual resources. Corridor management plans are needed to assure preservation of scenic qualities along these resources and within communities. Visual assessments conducted on a county or regional level, whether for road corridor plans, environmental review or historic landscapes, help establish a baseline for scenic integrity and may lead to visual management plans for communities. Viewshed studies and scenic data are needed to develop geographic information that may assist in modeling potential opportunities for conservation and enhancement of scenic resources.

*Scenic areas endow communities with substantial benefits, such as higher property values and increased tourism revenue. Protecting scenic vistas and viewsheds from the effects of haphazard development allows a community to preserve its unique charm, build civic pride and attract positive growth to the area.*

—National Scenic Byways Program

Planning for new roadways should include an assessment of the corridor's scenic environment by evaluating both the impacts of the proposed roadway as well as views from the roadway. Bridges are important design elements for creating visually interesting highways. Water is another aesthetic resource that can greatly enhance a highway's attractiveness. Older bridge designs generally allowed a water view and a unique architectural or engineering component to enhance structural appeal. New bridges should be designed to offer a safe, open parapet allowing vehicles and pedestrians a view of the open water and its surrounding landscape. Communities should stress a strong desire for visual and pedestrian access at all river crossings in their transportation planning efforts with VDOT. New and replacement bridges should provide recreational access to appropriate water bodies.

An assessment process is important in identifying scenic resources, both to and from the visual resources. Visual assessments help ensure the appropriate placement of new development while conserving existing scenic resources. Visual assessments are used to develop strategies for conservation and protection of resources, as well as to determine ongoing management techniques for long-term sustainability of resources.

Communities and citizens often need to become more aware of the importance of protecting scenic resources, both legislatively and voluntarily. Illustrating the economic development opportunities and benefits available to communities that undertake efforts to improve their appearance will encourage citizens to

protect and enhance their communities. Through green infrastructure planning, each community should identify and protect its scenic resources. Local communities working in concert with conservation and scenic interest organizations help retain the important scenic quality of the Commonwealth for years to come.

For the most part, protecting visual resources is not regulated by local land use ordinances, developmental and architectural guidelines, or state legislation. Local citizens and communities are responsible for identifying those visual resources that they consider important to their quality of life. Local measures are important in planning for and implementing strategies to protect scenic character in communities across Virginia.

### Selected resources and references

Federal Highways Administration. 1994. *Visual Prioritization Process – User's Manual*. U.S. Department of Transportation.

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Rattlesnake Point in Shenandoah National Park. Photo by NPS.